

Michael Collins Commemoration

At Béal na Bláth

August 25, 2013

Address by Bill O’Herlihy

I am immensely flattered to be asked to address this gathering today. As a proud Corkman I can think of no greater compliment than being honoured with the task of speaking at the annual Béal na Bláth commemoration. So many great names of Irish history, of Irish politics and of Irish business have stood where I am standing now, that I can only feel humbled by the privilege. The fact that last year’s speaker was the Taoiseach Enda Kenny only underlines the importance of the occasion. I thank you for asking me to be part of it.

Michael Collins was a great man, a nation-builder, a visionary, a deep thinker about the future of Ireland and someone whose ambition and aspiration is still, tantalisingly, unmet. That is what makes this annual commemoration an important national event, one that makes the whole country sit up and take notice.

We meet again at Béal na Bláth on the 91st anniversary of Collins’ death to remind ourselves of what must still be done to achieve the grand design that Collins dreamed of and worked for and to ponder on what he might have done had he not been snatched from the public stage at such a youthful age, a mere 32 years old when he died close to this spot.

In thinking about the theme for this address, the youth & vigour of those who created the Irish revolution has been at the forefront of my mind. As many of you probably know, I have spent the greater part of my career studying, analysing and appraising the performances of youthful endeavour on the playing fields at home and abroad. I have learned to appreciate the single-minded dedication and discipline as well as the strength and enthusiasm of our athletic youth and have seen how this has lifted the morale of the nation and sustained it through difficult and trying times.

As in so many other ways, Michael Collins was way ahead of his time in his realisation of the virtues of sport and how sport could be harnessed to bring a spirit and cohesion to his political

and military endeavours. Sport for him became part of his inspiration. The challenge of sport to galvanise the nation really has not changed all that much in the 91 years since Collins died. Look at our response to the gold medal of Rob Heffernan at the World Athletics Championships which have just ended.

Much stress has been focused, not unnaturally, on Michael Collins the architect of the War of Independence. Little enough attention has been devoted to Collins' admittedly brief tenure as a sports administrator.

When he emigrated to London in 1906, Collins quickly made three decisions, not necessarily unconnected. These decisions would change his life and they would in turn change the course of life for the rest of us on this Island. Firstly he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood, being sworn in by his fellow post office worker, the Dunmanway man, Sam Maguire.

He also joined the Gaelic League and he chose a leadership role for himself in the GAA; the secret IRB believing that it should have its members well placed in all the legitimate Irish organisations and social groups. No one ever accused Collins of being other than a rugged individualist, but he took to sports organising with the restless impulse that characterised the rest of his career.

By 1908 he had himself elected vice captain of the Geraldines Hurling Club in London, even though he wasn't what you would call a polished player. He has been described as an effective mid-fielder, a description which in my experience can mean almost anything.

I suspect that his temper would have seen him capture a few red cards if red cards had been invented at the time.

But organisation and administration were his strong suits and eloquence and persuasion completed this suite of talents that would have made him a very incisive commentator if commentators were around at the time. He was elected to the London board of the GAA and took on the key administrative role of club secretary, a job he managed to retain until he returned to Dublin in 1916 to prepare for the Rising.

As an administrator he was not shy about confronting dissidents whenever he met them and there was plenty of dissidence in the ranks of the Geraldines. Once, he was obliged to warn club members: 'In no single contest have our colours been crowned with success... signs of decay are unmistakable and if members are not prepared in the future to act more harmoniously

together, and more self-sacrificing generally – the club will soon fade into inglorious and well deserved oblivion.’ This censure and the implicit recognition of the value of disciplined organisation and solidarity told much about the maturity of Collins, then only in his early twenties.

It is clear Collins wanted his own way and was impatient with malcontents, but he was immensely proud of what Irish sport signified, and in this too there is a lesson for the modern era. A former colleague in one of the banking institutions for which Collins worked in London, told Collins’ biographer Rex Taylor that he once asked the great man, in fun, if hurling was a civilised sport? ‘Yes,’ Collins replied, ‘it is part of the most civilised race on earth.’

In sport, aspects of greatness occasionally sparkle through and in Collins’ sporting life the seeds of his determination as well as his magnanimity shone brightly. He was driven, as all sportsmen must be, but few sportsmen ever faced the challenges and the decisions that confronted Collins when he left London behind him and picked up the military and subsequently nation-building role he would assume in the following six years.

These brought all his talents into display; his personal bravery; the courage that demanded life and death decisions for his army and the army of Empire that he faced down; and he had to confront the ultimate breach with the friends and colleagues of the struggle, which was probably his hardest battle of all. Negotiating a path of disciplined adherence to the policies of 1916 left him and his fellow soldiers on different sides of a barricade and that challenge too could only be endured by a man of unique character, gumption and backbone.

At Béal na Bláth we cannot forget these events and the tragedy and drama of those years, but I would argue here with you today, that in most respects these are the preoccupations of yesteryear. For so long in Ireland we have been caught up with past battles. There can only be so many rematches, there comes a time when old fights can no longer teach us any more lessons. That, I hasten to say, is not to suggest that the values of Collins or those who took issue with him in the Civil War can be disposed of in the dustbin of history.

Far from that, greatness must be cherished as happens in sport, where we still remember and praise athletes of the past. But Ireland has long reached the point where the divisions of the Civil War have become a damaging anachronism. When the historian Maurice Manning, then a Fine Gael Senator, spoke at this commemoration 14 years ago, he quoted from a letter written by Michael Collins to Garret FitzGerald’s father Desmond FitzGerald in 1922. The letter said:

‘What we must aim at is the building of a sound economic life in which great discrepancies cannot occur. We must not have destitution or poverty at one end and at the other an excess of riches in the possession of a few individuals beyond what they can spend with satisfaction and justification.’ Collins went on: ‘The growing wealth of Ireland will, we hope, be diffused through all our people, all sharing in the growing prosperity, each receiving what each contributes in the making of that prosperity, so that the wealth of all is assured.’

These important thoughts and other elements of the Collins’ vision for the future of Ireland were contained in the posthumously published volume *The Path to Freedom*. It is a book that should be re-read, especially by politicians who might then challenge themselves with the question: can we in all honesty claim to have ever come near to that equal society so dear to the heart of Michael Collins? I suggest that even in the best economic times we never came remotely close. Was this because we had a political structure that had one eye on the past? Does it make any sense to have the major political parties tussling for power where, for so long, the width of a sheet of tissue paper scarcely separated their policies? How much more progress, how much more reform would be possible if senseless old historical divisions were eliminated from our politics?

I know the political analysts have been labouring for decades trying to analyse the paradox of having the two best-supported political parties at loggerheads for generations over passions played out eighty years ago. I’m old enough to understand the phenomenon but the vast majority of the people of Ireland have lost any real contact with that quarrel. They have every right to be impatient with it. The excuse has always been: ‘this is Ireland and Ireland is different.’ In other countries very much more recent, very much more destructive wars have been set aside and normal politics resumed. We seem to want to be different.

Two of the country’s leading political scientists, Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh set to the task in 2002 of spotting the differences between Fine Gael and Fianna Fail. They quoted the former Labour Minister, Barry Desmond who revealed that he had been given the last word on this subject by a Cork Fianna Failer of his acquaintance. Desmond was told: “Dem dat know don’t need to ask and them dat don’t know don’t need to know.”

That sort of political Paddywhackery still raises a laugh. But it is also backward, old-hat and massively unhelpful. It suggests that the differences between the two parties in pursuing progressive economic and social policies are at best contrived.

That is surely a damning indictment of the political system. The only reason it has not changed is because that's the way it has always been!! It is an argument that would get an F grade in any test of logic.

I think we must realise that the time is long past when sloganeering must be replaced by fresh thinking. The way we deal with politics in this country demands change. Our challenges, as serious as they have ever been in the history of this country, can only be helped by the clean sweep idea that inspired Collins and his generation. Moreover, we cannot continue to distort the language of politics that we have been doing for so long.

For example, we took the classic and noble concept of the republic which means a society with equality between its members, and turned that word into something dark and threatening. When Des O'Malley famously said that he stood for the Republic, it made headlines because the language of politics in this country is an arcane language that only we can understand.

Most people with any feeling for this country should stand for the Republic, the republic of equality and fair dealing, the republic that has no time for strokes, vested interests and political chicanery. The idea of re-embracing the word republic is another reason why I find the notion that Fianna Fail and Sinn Féin might merge or coalesce to be a disturbing and retrogressive idea.

It might seem strange to say so at the site devoted to a freedom fighter but maturity, along with the written legacy of Michael Collins himself, tells us that any politics with wistful yearnings for a violent past is exactly what we don't want. It is something we want to get away from, rather than embrace. Sinn Féin deserves credit for the slow and tortuous progress that has been made in Northern Ireland and the party deserves the maximum encouragement to continue the process. But only Fine Gael and Fianna Fail have the proven trust of the people of this Republic over the past eighty years. They should examine and if necessary pool what they share and allow the people of this country to reap the benefits.

I am aware not everyone shares this view and, frankly, it is more easily said than done especially if you examine the developments of the more recent past which have been characterized by a major shift in the political landscape. For many going to the polls, the historic divisions still hold sway but some experts will tell you De Valera's last General Election in 1957 was also the last election in which civil war politics played a significant part.

By 1961 a new direction, begun by John A Costelloe and Gerald Sweetman and led by Sean Lemass and T K Whittaker was sweeping Ireland. It was marked by the creation of the IDA and the first Programme for Economic Expansion. It spoke of free trade, of inward investment, of industrial development and Programmes for Economic Expansion and even of joining the newly formed EEC. The era of protectionism was over. A new generation of Fianna Fáil politicians embraced this thinking and the Party morphed gradually away from its aura of romantic republicanism with its twin 'unachievable' national aims of unity and language and its 'party of the common people' positioning, into the party of establishment and big business.

Fine Gael, looking towards Social Democracy, moved in the opposite direction, influenced by the politics of 'Just Society', progressive thinkers like Declan Costelloe and leaders like Garrett Fitzgerald and Alan Dukes and entered into competition with Labour in the centre-left ground leaving Fianna Fáil alone as the natural party of government.

Recent events, the Ahern leadership, the era of tribunals and corruption, the catastrophic mismanagement of the economy and the arrival of the dynamic leadership of Enda Kenny to Fine Gael together with an influx of young pragmatic politicians, have reversed the shape of Irish politics. A greatly expanded and focused Fine Gael has moved with determination into the 'governing' centre-right position, leaving Fianna Fáil to compete with Labour and a renewed Sinn Féin for space in the centre-left ground. This, experts will argue, is the natural working of party politics in modern European democracies. But must it always be so?

I was fascinated by Mary O'Rourke's recent speech. She articulated a view that I have heard many express, that perhaps we had reached the time to forego differences, historic and otherwise, to engage the mind on the possibility of a coming together of Fine Gael – Fianna Fáil.

I recognise this would represent a sea-change in Irish political life and an enormous challenge to implement. I recognise the difficulties; I recognise the fear people have of an overwhelming political majority; I recognise the distrust the electorate has because of actions of the recent Fianna Fáil administration and the determination they will not recur; I recognise the promise of significant political reform is moving more slowly than we would wish.

But in spite of all these reservations, I believe coalition of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil has much to offer at a time of huge challenge for Ireland. I suspect the Irish people would like to see this development I would like to see this development in a new political landscape true to the ideals of Collins. Collins in *The Path to Freedom* laid heavy stress on the real riches of the Irish nation,

what he called the ‘dowries of nature with which we are blessed,’ but the resource he was proudest of was the spirit of the people.

So cast your mind back to any of the last five or six years and think of the depressing list of official reports that have highlighted the abuse, neglect and degradation of vulnerable members of our society. Ponder for a minute how the brusque, impatient Michael Collins would have responded to the treatment of certain children in the Ireland he helped create? Also ask yourself what would he have made of the shameful inadequacies of our mental health services? Then think on about the abject squandering of precious resources in the banker-led bubble, the loss of Irish sovereignty, the humiliation of Ireland being described as the ‘Wild West’ of European finance.

From my reading of *The Path to Freedom*, from my understanding of Michael Collins and his passion for change – not to speak of his legendary temper – I suggest the indifferent and the complaisant would have got very short shrift indeed.

These are not untimely thoughts. We have just embarked on a decade of non-stop centenary celebrations which will serve to remind us that our old wars are past. We must learn from the past but we must also be instructed by the mistakes of our own generation. In the short term we have the current loss of our economic sovereignty to remind us that we have a big job ahead of us. It is a time for new politics and a start cannot begin quickly enough.

There is a certain solemnity about the annual commemoration at Béal na Bláth. It is a pilgrimage site in many ways; a way of paying homage to a generation that made such an important contribution to the Irish nation and helped make us proud and independent. The organisers of this event have made the Collins commemoration a place where we can brush up our ideas; where we have the opportunity to reflect on public life in a way that does not present itself elsewhere.

We pay tribute to Collins while knowing that we can only make him proud of our generation only by being smart, creative and honest and that we are realistic enough to know where we have blundered. A reformed politics would kick-start important changes, in my view.

I am most grateful for the opportunity to be able to speak to you today. I thank you for listening.